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A voice for Indians' plight in Nicaragua

By Marc Lee
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Russell Means, the American Indian activist known for his 1973 shootout with the FBI at Wounded Knee, S.D., yesterday called Daniel Ortega's Sandinista government in Nicaragua one of the 20th century's most violent regimes.

"They stand next to [former Cambodian leader] Pol Pot in their thirst for genocide," said Mr. Means, still smarting from a shrapnel wound sustained during a just completed clandestine tour of Indian villages in eastern Nicaragua.

"Support of the Sandinistas is unholy. I just don't want to have to be proven right after the holocaust," he said, following his monthlong adventure.

Mr. Means, a founder of the American Indian Movement, is in Washington to ask the Reagan administration to give financial and military aid to Indian tribes opposing the Sandinista government.

Sandinistas frequently raid Indian villages, taking children away in Soviet-made helicopters, he said. "They take them off and kill them. I saw 29 teen-age boys, ages 12 to 16, taken from one village. They are never seen again once they're taken."

Mr. Means said the Sandinistas are bent on genocide, killing and torturing Miskito, Suma and Rama Indians. He described the Sandinistas' common methods of torture as electric shock to the testicles, breaking bones with 2-by-4s and pulling off fingernails.

"Burning people alive and raping women is also commonplace," said Mr. Means. "Village churches and schools have been transformed into torture chambers."

Mr. Means was accompanied on his trip by two other North American activists, Hank Adams of Olympia, Wash., and Clem Chartier, a Canadian who heads the World Council of Indigenous People.

The group set out secretly from Costa Rica Jan. 7, protected by Misurasata fighters, an Indian rebel group led by Brooklyn Rivera.

During the group's stay in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas issued over public radio a death warrant for Mr. Means and told village Indians that Mr. Means "had to be exterminated because the team was in the country to discredit the government.

"They threatened to murder anyone giving us aid," he said.

The Nicaraguan armed forces set up a naval blockade to catch the group, Mr. Means said. "They hunted us with helicopters during the night."

Although pursued by government troops, the team escaped serious injury. But Mr. Means suffered an abdominal wound when a bomb exploded near him. The group paddled out of Nicaragua in a canoe and made a 24-hour trip to the island of San Andres in Colombian territory.

Mr. Means said the Misurasata Indian rebels are "fearless fighters," but they now must capture all of their weapons from the Sandinistas.

"They just need guns, ammunition, boots and medicine," he said. "You'll never hear them asking for anything more, because they're a self-sufficient people."

The Indian activist said American liberals and radicals have not helped the Indian cause. "We certainly have no liberal friends," he said. "From hippies to Walter Mondale, they are a bunch of welfare clients. They're great at championing someone else's revolution, but they never do anything themselves.

"I describe liberals as opinion pollsters. Whatever the latest opinion poll shows, they move in that direction," Mr. Means said. "They are now vehemently condemming me on grounds that I've been bought by the CIA. Can you imagine that?"

Mr. Means opposes U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan resistance fighters, because he says the Contras are fighting a war that could last for another 60 years, whereas the "Indians and Creole," who claim to control 45 percent of Nicaraguan soil, could wage a winnable war.

"You're fighting a sophisticated communist regime, and the Contras lack the manpower and the military might needed to wage a successful war," he said.

The Sandinistas are dangerous because they are such "sophisticated liars," Mr. Means said. "They have managed to turn the word 'atrocity' into the word 'mistake.' They have systematically persecuted Catholics, and yet they get Catholic support from this country."

During his stay in Washington, Mr. Means said he will try to arrange a meeting with President Reagan to report his findings and gain support for the Indians' plight in Nicaragua.

"I admire [Mr. Reagan] because he lets you know exactly what he stands for," Mr. Means said. "Hopefully, he'll be able to give us some support. The Reagans are not the dangerous people in the world. It's the Carters and the Mondales who are really dangerous."

If the United States doesn't offer assistance, Mr. Means said he will seek support from other nations and international organizations. Mr. Means said he will present documents of his recent trip to the United Nations Commission of Human Rights and to Congress.

"My people only have two choices," he said. "Fight or be exterminated."

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